

**Sunny Bank, Our Ancestral Home**  
**By Andrew Patterson (1995)**

**Chapter 3**

**The People of Sunny Bank**

As elsewhere in North America, the earliest residents of Gaspé were natives, probably of the Micmac tribe, which frequented this part of the continent. Being nomadic people, little has been documented about their history.

One of the first recorded events in the Gaspé area is the famous arrival of Jacques Cartier in 1534. The port of Gaspé was undoubtedly used by many European fishermen as a base during fishing trips to North America. There was excellent fishing in the gulf of St. Lawrence, and Gaspé Bay was considered by some to be one of the finest ports on the east coast of Canada. During the early part of the 18th century Gaspé changed hands several times as a result of wars and treaties in Europe. The first winterings were probably attempted by the French around 1745. Within ten years there were around 300 inhabitants. The principal occupation was fishing, although there was a community of seven houses around the lumber mill on the York River.

The earliest recorded event in Sunny Bank was the burning of that lumber mill at the sight of the present fish hatchery. In effort to win the land from the French, the British Government commissioned General Wolfe to destroy all the fishing villages along the St. Lawrence River. Among his victims was the small fishing village of Gaspé, in the Gaspé Bay. Some historians believe this village was located at Peninsula Point (Penouille), although after extensive research on the subject Ms. Dorothy Phillips has concluded it was in Gaspé Harbour.

During their stay at Gaspé a small group of soldiers were sent up the south-west arm to what is still called Mill Brook to destroy the lumber mill which had been constructed by the French. Captain Bell, in his diary of events recorded the incident as follows:

“...On the 7th [Sept. 1758] at day break we went up the farther arm having heard some of the people were there, 'tis ten mile up to the morass, the channel the same in regard to its difficulty as to other, we took 8 men here and sent them down in barge (1 an Indian) then went to a sawmill just by where we found a vast number of plank, we immediately fell to work and sett fire to the moulin, ... we came back by land along the shore, which was not the pleasantest walk in the world, nothing but stones extremely slippery & every 3 yards a great tree to get over, ...”

After Wolfe's victory at Quebec the French were evicted from many rural settlements, including Gaspé. Within the next ten years three English families settled in the area. Richard Ascah settled on Peninsula Point in about 1764, and later moved to the mainland near St. Matthew's Church. Felix O'Hara received a large tract of land in the present town of Gaspé, and John Paterson settled in Sunny Bank.

Why did Europeans leave their homelands to settle in a deserted wilderness such as this? For many reasons... to escape poverty and war, both very common in Europe at that time; to find vacant land which was growing scarce in their homeland; to find religious freedom; and to follow their dreams, getting a new start in life. In any case they were seeking their fortunes in a new land. These hopes and aspirations must have been quickly stifled when the newcomers found themselves faced with the practically endless toil involved in setting up and maintaining a homestead. Even after a family was well established, the tasks involved in self-preservation were endless. Why would anyone choose a desolate area like Gaspé, or more particularly Sunny Bank, to establish a permanent home? Undoubtedly the natural beauty of the region influenced their decision, but most were enticed by the growing fishing industry and the abundance of fish in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It was written by Nicholas Cox in his report which accompanied the census of Gaspé, taken in 1777:

“This is the only safe harbour between Quebec and Nova Scotia, and on that account will in time likely be the principle fishing port. Upon an average there has been for these last five years exported from this port about sixteen thousand quintals [a weight equivalent to 112 pounds] and about twelve sail of [?] yearly employed besides [?]. Three families only occupy the land at Gaspé, but about thirty men winter there, belonging to the different fishing places in the bay. [?], Georges Cove, Grand Grave, L'Anse a Briand.

“The land at Gaspé is very mountainous, a hard dry soil; what has been cleared produces Wheat, Barley, Oats and all kinds of vegetables to perfection, but believe it must require great Labour to contynue it in heart. I could fix on no place in this bay for barracks for want of fresh water.”

It is doubtful that John Paterson, who settled in Sunny Bank about 1764, was involved in the fishing industry. He had been present when Wolfe invaded the French settlement at Peninsula in 1758. It is quite possible that he had his first glimpse of the area while part of the mission sent out to destroy the lumber mill. His reasons for being attracted to the area are not known, but he did return to Gaspé about 6 years after his first visit, and settled permanently on the south side of the York River. Certainly life must have been difficult during those first years. Building a cabin, hunting and fishing for food, cutting wood for heat, tending livestock and raising a family of young children must have kept pioneers busy. For over half a century John Paterson and his family were Sunny Bank's only residents. At first their only neighbors were the O'Hara family living 10 km (six miles) away in Gaspé, and the Ascah family in Peninsula, although a number of fishermen came and stayed during the summer. Visiting their nearest neighbors would have required a long walk or canoe ride in summer, and a long snowshoe hike in winter. Life must have been lonely and desolate.

Precisely what John did for a living remains a mystery, although his choice of homestead suggests he may have been involved in lumbering. Certainly large quantities of lumber would have been required to support Gaspé's shipbuilding industry which was experiencing rapid growth late in the 18th century.

John, his eldest son, moved to Perce about 1784, and Peter married about 1796 and stayed in Sunny Bank. After a few years John returned to the Southwest Arm, settling across the York River in Wakeham.

In the half-century following 1812 another five families, the Grants, Millers, Eagles, Nelsons, and finally the Clarks established permanent homes in Sunny Bank. Even by 1871, when the population of Sunny Bank had increased to 71 people, there was still no sign of modern living. The only roads were trails from one house to another. Even going the 10 km (six miles) to Gaspe for provisions required a full day by canoe. Schooling had just become available for those fortunate enough to be spared from the many chores at home. Boats bringing provisions and mail to Gaspe arrived once or twice a week from Quebec City during summer, leaving Gaspe completely isolated during winter when ice blocked the water routes.

The first century of settlement in Sunny Bank is a sort of dark period in its history, as little in the form of written records remain. The few diaries or records that might have survived may have been burned after the diphtheria epidemic of 1862 or trashed after older citizens passed on. One can only surmise what an average year would bring for Sunny Bank's pioneers. Spring would be a wonderful experience, emerging from months of cold and isolation. The first boats would bring provisions and news of events long since forgotten by the rest of the world. Mail from family and friends would arrive. Communication would be re-established. Even visiting nearby neighbors would be much easier, leading to many parties and some leisure activities. Women anxiously awaited the arrival of the early vessels, which would bring with them material for clothes and news of the latest fashions.

Spring also brought the beginning of hard work that lay ahead, preparing for another winter. Sheep had to be sheared and wool carded for later use. Farm equipment had to be brought out and prepared for use. Fields had to be plowed and made ready for the life-supporting crops of potatoes, oats, wheat, and a variety of hardy vegetables. Long days of plowing and planting were mingled with days of fishing, or repairing buildings or machinery damaged during winter.

Gardens needed constant attention during summer and by mid-July the annual crop of hay had ripened, ready for harvesting. To feed the horses and cattle owned by most families, several days of continuously swinging the scythe were required. Raking the hay was done by hand. Once dry it was loaded into primitive carts and hauled into the barn. Summer was also a time for the men to undertake some sort of work which would gain the family a meager income with which to purchase essentials which couldn't be grown on the farm. Sunny Bank families were involved in such industries as lumbering, coopering, shingle-making, salmon fishing (in the bay with nets), and whaling.

As fall approached the harvesting of crops took precedence. Vegetables were stored in underground cellars and berries were picked and preserved in jam. Most families caught a few salmon in the nearby York River, which were smoked and kept for special occasions

during the months ahead. In autumn, hunting expeditions were undertaken, one part of a man's work which provided some pleasure. Often this was done late enough that dog sled could be used travelling to and from the hunting grounds. Commonly hunted animals in this area were caribou, moose and deer, as well as small game such as partridge and rabbit.

Finally winter arrived. Travel became difficult, if not impossible, and people spent much of their time inside. Women got involved in knitting and sewing projects, and men often worked on farm machinery, built furniture, or renovated homes. The long evenings saw card parties, dances, and many sing-alongs, where whole families congregated around someone playing a crude musical instrument. Life was very family oriented. With no radios or televisions, people were forced to create their own entertainment, a trait that has been lost during the past few decades.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century brought many changes, most of which will be outlined in detail later. Much of the civilized world provided education as part of a youngster's life. It was in the early 1870's that the people of York constructed their first one-room schoolhouse. As horses became a more popular way of travelling a "pull-yourself ferry" was established crossing the York River near where the bridge is now situated. Prior to this, practically all travel had been by canoe or skiff. Now the Wakeham road (probably better referred to as a 'trail') could be used.

During this period Sunny Bank was probably more closely affiliated with Wakeham than the rest of York. Wakeham had the nearest Post Office, providing a weekly service under the name Gaspé Bay South. Churchgoers crossed the river in canoes or flats to go to St. James Church in Wakeham, and dances usually attracted crowds from both municipalities.

Finally, just before the turn of the century York made a major step forward with the construction of its own church, St. Andrew's located in Sunny Bank. In addition, in 1899, the Post Office was established in York. This post office provided a meeting place where the elderly could spend time catching up on, or creating local gossip. Around this time the Gaspé Fish Hatchery, located in Gaspé Harbour, began using the Salmon Pond in Sunny Bank to house as many as two to three hundred adult salmon for spawning in the fall. During this same period two new families, a branch of the Palmers from Wakeham, and a branch of the Coffins from L'Anse aux Cousins, moved into Sunny Bank.

With the ever-increasing population came the need for better roads, which were gradually being improved. Although mere trails existed, bridges were constructed over streams and brooks so horses could be used to carry supplies during the summer. Even during this time travelling to Gaspé was a rare and much enjoyed adventure. The return trip usually took half a day, and was only undertaken when provisions from Gaspé's few stores were needed.

Travel abroad also became feasible. As today many young people left, heading for Montreal or Ontario searching for work. Some returned to Gaspé to live, but many established residences elsewhere, leading to the incredible number of people throughout

the world descended from Sunny Bankers. It wasn't until 1911 that the railroad provided a second link with the outside world.

The advent of the 20th century brought many conveniences that made work easier for both the men and women who chose to remain. Farm equipment was improved. Scythes and hand rakes were replaced with horse-drawn mowing machines and rakers. Improved plows made it easier to cultivate the land and the harrow saved many days of weeding by hand. In the woods the crosscut saw used for harvesting timber, was made obsolete by the Swede Saw. The latter was much smaller and could be readily handled by one man.

Lumbering was an important industry of Gaspé in its early days. Several families, including the Millers, supplemented the family income by selling "whip-sawed" lumber. Logs were cut and hauled in winter, and sawed by hand into boards during the summer.

Inside the house more modern wood-burning stoves made cooking easier. Sewing machines decreased the time necessary to make clothes for a family. Coal oil lanterns replaced candles, making work during the evenings easier. Crude phonographs and radios provided entertainment. Contact with the outside world became regular, with daily mail, the telegraph, and eventually the telephone for emergencies.

Although these years were still truly pioneer times, the addition of modern machinery, the increased contact with and travel to the outside, and the occasional "store-bought" clothes, made people feel part of the modern world. Gaspé however, as many isolated areas even today, remained technologically behind the rest of the world. As with most underdeveloped places the labors of reaping raw products from the land for export were inadequately rewarded. Logs were cut and floated down the rivers for sale to Shepard and Morse in L'Anse aux Cousins, with the company reaping most of the profits from lumber sales abroad. Blueberries were picked on the "Berry Hill" and sold to a cannery located about a half mile below Mill Brook, in present day Brassett. Americans, who owned large sections of our rivers and came annually to fish the plentiful salmon, hiring local help. These and other outside sources provided a meager income for residents of the area.

At this time when life was beginning to look wonderful, World War I began. Many of Sunny Bank's men volunteered to go and fight in the name of freedom including: Edward Coffin, Wyndham Coffin, Archie Grant, Lloyd Nelson, Benjamin Grant, Bert Palmer, James Palmer (died at Vimy Ridge), Johnny Palmer, Lionel Palmer, Allan Patterson, Coleman Patterson, Gerry Patterson, and Peter Patterson, Vivian Patterson. Before the world had recovered properly, the depression struck, crushing the world's booming economy. Cities were devastated but outreaches like Gaspé felt little effect except the closing of major industries. Being farmers and primarily dependent on the land, life in Sunny Bank continued much as before.

By the 1930's skating and hockey became popular winter sports. Sunny Bankers weren't going to be left behind, especially with its ideal location for a rink. The "Lowland", near the river was the perfect spot, and several families of young men lived nearby with plenty of idle time during winter to maintain it. Water could be found by simply digging a shallow hole in the ground, and fire pumps could be borrowed during the winter for

flooding. The rink gave rise to another social event, an annual winter carnival that brought the community together.

The next four decades could be considered Sunny Bank's "Boom years." Two generations grew up, increasing the population of the small community to well over 200 people. Several rinks opened and closed in close succession. For years Sunny Bank had its own hockey team which played rivals like Wakeham, York, Gaspé, and L'Anse-aux-Cousins. These games became large social events, often leading to a dance or house party. The Sunny Bank - Wakeham rivalry continued into the late 1950's, ending only when the Wakeham-York Combines were established to play in a local league.

Frequent house parties with plenty of "fiddlin' and dancin'" shortened the long winter evenings. The building of the York Hall around the turn of the century provided a public meeting place for large crowds, enriching community life. Weddings, children's parties, and dances were held regularly. Groups also got together and put on plays and concerts with local talent.

Modern inventions gradually entered the homes. Radios and phonographs became common. Cars gradually replaced horses until the latter became almost obsolete as a means of transportation. The trip to Gaspé became a routine ten or fifteen minute drive, instead of an occasional adventure. High school students were bussed to Gaspé on a daily basis instead of boarding in Gaspé during the week as they were obliged to do only short years earlier. Sunny Bank had its own Post Office, Church, General Stores, and elementary school. The Fish Hatchery, which moved to Sunny Bank about 1915 became one of Gaspé's major tourist attractions, in addition to providing employment. Other jobs were provided by the local salmon fishing clubs, Gaspesia Pulp and Paper in the lumberwoods, and now that commuting to and from Gaspé was easy many worked there. Many people, both those still residing in Sunny Bank, and others who have long since vacated in search of greener pastures, consider those years "the best years of their lives."

Then second World War uprooted many local men who volunteered their services. The following people served: Herman Coffin (killed in action), Leopold Coffin, Weston Eagle, Whorrel Eagle, Albert Grant (killed in action), Charles Grant, Harold Grant, Calvin Miller, Edgar Miller (wounded in action), Emery Miller, George Miller, James Miller, Julian Miller, Kingsley Miller, Leonard Miller, Mortimer Miller (killed in action), Norman Miller, Roy Miller, Russell Miller, Sydney Miller, Trevor Miller (killed in action), Watson Miller, Wilton Miller, Sydney Nelson, Harris Palmer, Weston Palmer, William Palmer, Aldon Patterson, Anthony Patterson, Eric Patterson, Leonard Patterson, Owen Patterson, Ulric Patterson, Vincent Patterson, Ward Patterson, Wilfred Patterson. Several others enlisted and for medical or other reasons never went over-seas. In addition, some of those not eligible, found employment at the "Boom Defense," a naval anti-submarine base in Sandy Beach.

By the early 1960's Sunny Bank began to lose its identity. Residents socialized within a broader circle of friends. Many young families had moved away and several houses were sold to complete strangers. The York School closed in 1958. Television came to Gaspé in 1962, detracting from the need for strong social ties. The Canadian Government closed

our Post Office in 1967. During the 1970's the Quebec Government enforced legislation restricting the rights of English Quebecers, which lead to the exodus of many residents. All these factors have eroded the sense of community spirit, which once prevailed. At present, as in the earliest days of settlement, the English of the region feel a certain isolation. This, in turn, aided by such annual events as the Homecoming Festival and the annual Winter Carnival, is encouraging the formation of a closer social liaison among English Gaspesians.